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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 May 2011]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Bahrain: Human rights violations during pro-democracy protests**

On 14 February, 2011, several thousands of Bahrainis participated in widespread demonstrations demanding a margin of public freedoms and asking for a new constitution that ensures a truly constitutional monarchy marked by more democratic institutions. The protestors also demanded the establishment of an independent body to investigate long-time social, political, and economic violations committed by the ruling authorities, including stolen public wealth, political naturalization¹, arrests, torture, and other oppressive security measures, in addition to institutional and economic corruption. The strategies used by the ruling authorities in Bahrain to suppress this peaceful pro-democratic popular uprising are similar to those used by the ousted regimes of Tunisia and Egypt to counter similar protests. The government of Bahrain has met these demands with a security strategy that targeted young activists, using excessive violence, extrajudicial killings, and a massive wave of arbitrary arrests and detentions, in an attempt to disperse peaceful unarmed protestors.² Consequently, the ceiling of the demands of the protestors has risen and they have opted for dialogue with the government on the condition that the latter meets certain preconditions and guarantees. These include the dismissal of the government that is responsible for the extrajudicial killings of peaceful protesters, the formation of a national coalition interim government, guaranteeing the security of the protestors, the release of all prisoners of conscience,³ and an independent investigation into the attacks and abuses committed by the security forces.

Facing domestic and international pressure for the crimes it has committed, the government of Bahrain has announced that it will investigate allegations of extrajudicial killings and that it will allow the public gatherings of protestors. In the meantime, the government has again extended a call for a national dialogue. However, the national dialogue has failed to achieve its goals due to a lack of sufficient political will by the government to prosecute the perpetrators of the violations and address the demands of the protestors. Instead, the government of Bahrain has continued its propaganda campaign claiming that these protests are sectarian in nature, and has failed to respond to the political and economic demands of the different segments of Bahraini society. Consequently, a series of widespread pro-democracy rallies have reoccurred across the kingdom to denounce the government's lack of reform efforts.

** Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), an NGO without consultative status, also shares the views expressed in this statement.

¹ Several political and human rights activists have accused the government of Bahrain of proceeding in a wide scale politically motivated naturalization of Sunnis designed to change the country's demography.

² On 14 February, 2011, 'Ali 'Abdulhadi Mushaima, 21, was shot with live ammunition in clashes between protestors and police in the village of al-Daih in the north of Bahrain. He was taken to the al-Salmaniya hospital in Manama, but died one hour later. His funeral the following day in Manama, organized to take his body from the hospital to the cemetery, was joined by over 10,000 people who called for a new constitution and a democratically elected government. Riot police used tear gas and shotguns to disperse the crowd, and over 20 people needed to be treated in hospital for wounds inflicted by the riot police. Fadhel 'Ali Matrook, 31, was injured by shotgun pellets near the al-Salmaniya hospital when riot police opened fire on the crowd without warning, and died later in the hospital.

³ BCHR, Press Release, "An open letter to the King of Bahrain to avoid the worst case scenario," available at: <http://www.webcitation.org/5wTZDwKtv>

The government of Bahrain has widely propagated a smear campaign against the protesters and protests, routinely using its state-controlled Bahrain TV and pro-government print media to describe protesters as traitors operating at the behest of Iran. The government propaganda campaign has incited violence against Bahrain's Shi'i majority. The government has used this campaign to divert the international community's attention from the root causes of the demands of Bahrainis.

Numerous human rights violations were committed in Bahrain between 14 February and 14 May 2011, including flagrant and systematic violations of the rights to physical integrity (the right to life, the right not to be tortured), liberty and security of the person, procedural fairness and rights of the accused, individual liberties (including freedom of movement, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association), and to the political rights of Bahraini citizens. The following will focus on the violent policing and collective punishment of peaceful civilians and pro-democracy protesters by security forces. Security forces have committed acts of retribution against medical staff and human rights defenders who have independently and impartially conducted their work during the mass pro-democracy rallies.

Violent policing by security forces

The large-scale public protests, which evolved into a sit-in at the Pearl-Roundabout in Manama, were met by severe repression and the excessive use of force to disperse protests. On 17 February, 2011, Bahraini security forces surrounded the Pearl Roundabout and brutally attacked protesters using live ammunition, rubber bullets, and tear gas to break up their sit-in. The crack-down resulted in serious injuries and the death of pro-democracy protesters. After the sit-in was dispersed, and while protesters were attempting to get back to the roundabout, the army used live bullets again, injuring more than 30 individuals, and killing one, to prevent further gatherings. A total of 400 activists were reportedly arrested during the following weeks and held incommunicado. Most were denied access to family and lawyers.

On 13 March alone, more than 200 hundred people were injured in a massive crackdown on peaceful rallies. The brutal crackdown has fuelled more protests across the country, prompting the Bahraini king to declare a state of emergency for three months⁴, which would authorize the nation's armed forces chief to take all measures to "protect the safety of the country and its citizens." The king further invited troops from the GCC countries to intervene and protect government installations. The GCC intervention helped the government to mount its most brutal attack on peaceful Bahraini protestors thus far. On 16 March, at least six people were killed and hundreds wounded when security forces crushed protesters who were camped out in Manama. Armed with tanks, helicopters, and jeeps mounted with machine guns, security forces fired tear gas, rubber bullets, bid shotgun pellets, and live ammunition into crowds of protesters, and destroyed vehicles.

While there is no sign of direct GCC involvement in the attack, the timing of the attack coincided with the start of the external intervention, and there are growing concerns that the crackdown was orchestrated by way of collusion with GCC member states.

⁴ On 3 May, the Bahraini parliament voted overwhelmingly to extend the "State of National Safety" for another three months, according to state media, even though it is not due to expire for another 6 weeks.

Between 14 February and 14 May, a total of 31 individuals were killed,⁵ and a total of 800 were arbitrary arrested and detained.⁶

Collective punishment of pro-democracy sympathizers

Between March and May 2011 the Government of Bahrain has systematically targeted health workers. Medical personnel who assisted the wounded and provided testimonies on human rights conditions in the country were abducted from their homes. Several physicians working at the Salmaniya complex were beaten by security forces because they refused to carry out security orders not to provide health care to hundreds of injured protestors. In addition, several eyewitnesses have confirmed that the government's security forces have stolen at least six ambulance vehicles and have used them for repressive purposes. In general, medical personnel who have attempted to save the life of injured protesters were subjected to physical violence. A total of 47 health professionals have been detained since Mid-March and remain detained as they await trial before military courts.

In addition, over 300 students have been dismissed from various programs of study at the University of Bahrain for participating in pro-democracy demonstrations. Moreover, more than 1000 workers have lost their jobs. In most cases, the stated reason for dismissal has been the absence from work during and immediately after street protests.

Human rights defenders have also been subject to acts of reprisal for their work on exposing human rights violations in Bahrain. Mr. Abdul Hadi Al-Khawaja⁷, former president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was arrested on 9 April in connection with his participation in pro-democracy protests. He has allegedly been tortured in detention and has had to undergo surgery as a result of sustained injuries. Al-Khawaja was one of 21 individuals presented for trial in September 2010 and accused of such charges as "organizing and managing a terrorist organization," "attempting to overthrow the government by force and in liaison with a terrorist organization," and "working for a foreign country." Another human rights defender, Mr. Ali Abdulemam,⁸ was one of those listed for trial in absentia as part of the same trial. Mr. Nabil Rajab⁹ was subject to physical and verbal abuse by police forces after being arrested from his house in March. Additionally, several media personnel and editors were also arrested, including Karim Fakhrawi and Zakariya Rashid Hassan who were arrested in April and died in detention.

It is incumbent on the Member States of the Human Rights Council to ensure that the Council fulfills its duty to respond promptly to this human rights emergency by urgently examining the allegations of grave human rights violations being carried out by the Government of Bahrain, and by taking steps to prevent violations from continuing. The undersigned NGOs urge the Council to hold, without delay, an urgent debate on the human rights situation in Bahrain.

⁵ For a detailed list of the deceased see <http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3864>

⁶ For a detailed list of the detainees see <https://spreadsheets.google.com/spreadsheet/pub?hl=en&hl=en&key=0ApabTTYHrcWDdDExVEs5Z1M3REFTN1EzTke4LVA0V0E&output=html>

⁷ Al-Khawaja is the former President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and was until February 2011 employed by Front Line as its Middle East and North Africa Protection Coordinator.

⁸ Abdulemam is an internationally renowned blogger and advocate for freedom of expression.

⁹ Rajab is the president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and Deputy Secretary General of International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH).